



The Feast of the Dead

By BERNARD McEvoy



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The Feast of the Dead

"In the Huron Nation territory, south of the Georgian Bay, both single and communal graves are met with. The former were probably made preparatory to the great Feast of the Dead, when the bones would be removed to a large pit dug on an eminence, and into which were placed sometimes as many as a thousand skeletons—the remains of those who had died during the previous ten or twelve years. Such ossuaries or bone-pits have been found at intervals as far south as the County of Wentworth."—*Notes on Primitive Man in Ontario*, by David Boyle.

I.

Lo, twice five years have passed, and o'er the land,
Through lodge and village
Goes forth a summons that all understand—
"Leave hunt and tillage ;
Leave bow and arrows ; leave your tomahawks,
And come, slow marching ;
Leave ye your pipes ; leave your sententious talks ;
Through trees o'er-arching

Bear ye your ten years' dead, that they may lie
 In proper glory,
Where the wind's anthem shall be chanted high
 By pine trees hoary.
Now bring the warrior to his sacred bed,
 With all his war gear ;
Now bring the hunter and each strong spear head
 That ever tore deer ;
Drive from your dead, that ye have laid on high,
 The buzzard swooping ;
And bring them here, in this wide grave to lie,
 That we are scooping."

Then through the arches of the pillared shade,
 Bearing their dead ones,
Each dusky tribe a long procession made,
 Led by its head ones ;
Chanting they came, and slow ; with rhythmic rune,
 Vaunted their heroes ;
There was a pride in that barbaric tune
 Great as was Nero's,
As by the side of that wide forest grave
 Hundreds assembled ;
For before those to whom they burial gave
 Foemen had trembled !

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Then that funereal bed they richly lined
 With skin of beaver,
And rich and trophied fur ; uncouth-designed
 Glories of weaver ;
Laid also there, in keeping for the dead,
 Vessels domestic,
And the rude weapons of the warrior dread—
 Warrior majestic,
Those that he had in life ; placing for use
 In the Hereafter,
The things of which the mighty praise profuse
 Had rung to rafter ;
Arrows that had upon the grassy plain
 Buffalo tumbled ;
Axes 'neath which the foeman erst was fain
 Prone to lie humbled ;
The string of wampum, and the carven pipe
 Reached from the worn thatch,
Strange things of polished bone, the yellow-ripe
 Cobs from the corn-patch.

Then laid they there in state the warriors' bones,
 With common people's ;
There was no muffled peal in solemn tones
 To ring from steeples ;

But their wild chant of exultation bade
 To grief defiance,
And on the promise of Ponemah made
 Its strong reliance.
Then having all, with pine-branch and with sod,
 Their dead immounded,
They left them to the watching of their God,
 Forest-surrounded.

II.

And we, who in these later decades mourn
 Those who have left us,
Should we permit their fame to be forsworn
 If Death bereft us?
Nay! raise once more the retrospective hymn,
 Their praises singing;
Let memory once again their features limn;
 Let Fancy, winging
Her solemn journey o'er the sequent years,
 Repeat their story;
Set forth once more, from Fame's high temple-stairs,
 Their grace and glory.

Show us once more the Warrior's trusty sword,
The Statesman's sceptre,
And those who o'er their country's weal held ward,
And ever kept her
Four-square to Truth and Right. Bring once again,
From Time's recesses,
The puissant wielders of the mighty pen—
The world confesses
The wreath is still unwithered on their brows.
From air surrounding
Recall the voices that had power to rouse ;
Then bring, resounding,
The songs the Singers sung in days gone by
With heart upbounding.
Strike yet once more the harp of minstrelsy
Of the great Master,
And let us feel once more the deep profound
Of our disaster,
For that no more his hand will sweep the string
To noble measure !

And, last, bring those who loved us, whose deep hearts
Knew all our sorrow,

Whose touch divinely healed our bitter smarts,
And each to-morrow
Gilded with hope.

What then? Bereft we stand,
And of Death's ravage
And the Hereafter, scarce we understand
More than the savage;
But, by this memory-honoured, lordly grave,
Where they are sleeping,
We, for our lost and great, may humbly crave
Heaven's high keeping!

BERNARD McEVoy

Toronto, July 6th, 1899.

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